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Economic and Social Council session on integrated and coordinated implementation and follow-up of the major United Nations conferences and summits

Summary by the President of the Council

Introduction

1. This session of the Economic and Social Council was of historic significance. Never in the history of the Council have so many key actors come together to have a dialogue, and to exchange views, on subject matter that drives so much of the work of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields. Chairs of the functional commissions, of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) task forces and standing committees, and of the executive boards of the funds and programmes as well as the executive heads of the funds and programmes and of the regional commissions, and representatives of civil society – all have contributed in a constructive, frank and open way to the success of this session. The session has provided a wealth of material from which the Council can draw and upon which it can build when it meets again on this subject at its substantive session of 1998 in July. Together with the report of the Secretary-General, which not only is comprehensive in scope but also contains many new ideas and proposals, the Council is now well positioned to tackle the all-important subject of conference follow-up and implementation.

2. The Charter of the United Nations gives the Council the all-important role of providing coordination in general and of giving guidance and oversight to its subsidiary bodies in particular. For a long time, the Council has fallen short in performing this essential task and only in recent years has it begun to reassert itself in carrying out this role.

3. This special session of the Council has given further evidence that the Council is becoming increasingly effective in carrying out its key role in ensuring that the follow-up to global conferences is well integrated, coordinated and effective. In no small way, this session is carrying forward the reform of the United Nations in the economic, social and related fields as set out in General Assembly resolutions 50/227 and 52/12 B.

4. The Council sits at the apex of the configuration of United Nations activities in the economic, social and related fields and as such has a crucial role to play from both a policy coordination standpoint and a management forum function. At the same time, integrating conference follow-up is a daunting task, which requires time, and in-depth examination, and the Council needs to reflect on how best to achieve it. Furthermore, the task at hand is now shifting towards implementation and monitoring of results.

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5. The breadth and depth of this task were clearly brought out in the deliberations and can be captured in the following six broad areas, namely (a) cross-cutting issues; (b) coordination and management role of the Council, in particular *vis-à-vis* its functional commissions and the executive boards of the funds and programmes; (c) inter-agency coordination; (d) country-level follow-up; (e) regional-level follow-up; and (f) monitoring. Under each of these broad areas, a wealth of detailed suggestions, proposals and recommendations have been made and these are reflected below:

I. Cross-cutting issues

- Poverty eradication and improving the living conditions of people everywhere should be the overriding objective of the Council's efforts to ensure an integrated and coordinated follow-up to conferences.
- In its role of overseeing the coordinated follow-up to conferences and summits, the Council will have to strike a proper balance between the specificity of each of the conferences and summits, which have their own specific and highly committed constituencies, and the need to address cross-cutting issues.
- It is important to maintain a balance between cross-sectoral and sectoral issues in conference follow-up. In addition, it is important that, in the coordinated follow-up, no single issue receive special attention over others. Selectivity in implementing commitments should be avoided.

A. Resources

- In focusing on cross-cutting issues, the Council has a special advantage over its functional commissions. The Council could use the various goals and targets as its organizing principle for monitoring progress in conference implementation.
- Linking the goals and targets to the issues of financing and assistance in achieving the commitments made at the conferences would be especially important, particularly in light of the decline in official development assistance (ODA).
- The decline in resources for conference implementation needs to be addressed by the Council, as well as the effective use and results of resource utilization, based, *inter alia*, on reports by funds and programmes.

B. Civil society

- Involvement of civil society in an effective way in the intergovernmental conference follow-up process is essential in view of the significant role that members of civil society have played in the conferences themselves as well as in their follow-up and implementation, particularly at the country level. The private sector should be involved as well, in calling upon civil society to take social concerns into account as regards the activities of its members.
- The Council should take the lead in promoting greater involvement of civil society in the work and activities of the United Nations. Panels at the Council could systematically include one representative of civil society and ways could be explored for non-governmental organizations to bring certain issues to the attention of the Council.
- Strengthening and adequately funding of the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) could also be considered.

II. Coordination and management role of the Council

- The Council, in its management function, should provide more effective guidance to its functional commissions and particularly to the executive boards of the funds and programmes that are responsible, together with specialized agencies and all other partners, for facilitating conference implementation at the country level.

A. Functional commissions

- As a matter of urgency, the Council needs to start a process, through a dialogue with all bureaux of functional commissions, of structuring and coordinating the preparations for forthcoming five-year reviews of conferences and of ensuring that the knowledge and expertise available in the whole system will be fully used in that process.

- Substantive interaction among commissions and with the Council needs to be further enhanced. The Council needs to consider commissions' outcomes in an integrated manner, and to identify conflicting approaches to providing guidance. It should also make greater use of substantive outcomes of its commissions in its own work.
- New developments have been occurring since the conferences took place: it would be useful for functional commissions to have an agenda item on emerging issues.
- Commissions have consistently improved their working methods, but there is scope for still further progress, in particular by refocusing general debates and expanding the interaction with civil society and experts.
- To ensure greater follow-up to commissions' outcomes, the Council could report every year on the principal outcomes of the functional commissions as regards follow-up to conferences, for transmission to funds, programmes and agencies, and broader dissemination.
- The Council should find ways of ensuring early availability of functional commissions' outcomes, so that they can be used in other forums. The Secretariat should clarify the legal status of these outcomes before the Council endorses them.
- The Secretariat should be actively involved in ensuring the coordination of functional commissions. This includes circulation of documentation and outcomes and a more proactive assistance in coordination.

B. Bureaux of the functional commissions

- Transmitting outputs and reports is not sufficient to ensure coordination. Commissions and their bureaux need to develop a culture of using other functional commissions' outcomes in their work. Personal interaction among bureau members – including having the chair of one functional commission attend the session of another commission – is essential.
- Greater interaction between the Bureau of the Council and the bureaux of functional commissions is essential. The Bureau of the Council could meet with chairpersons of functional commissions, in January or in May, to coordinate the work of the upcoming sessions and their preparations.
- Meetings between incoming and outgoing bureaux of functional commissions are important for continuity of work. For improved sessions' preparation, more functional commissions could consider electing their bureaux at the end of their session.
- Bureaux of functional commissions need to keep all member States fully informed on sessions' preparations. A mixed composition of bureaux balanced between capital experts and members of permanent missions could help maintain the commissions' expertise while enabling greater interaction with other bureaux.

C. Executive boards of the funds and programmes

- Linking the normative and operational parts of the work of the United Nations system remains a key challenge for conference implementation. Guidance by the Council has to become more focused and relevant to the activities of the funds and programmes, in particular in the context of the triennial policy review and agreed conclusions on conference follow-up. Enhanced interaction with executive boards of funds and programmes and with country teams could assist in this regard.
- The respective guidance roles of the Council and of the executive boards of funds and programmes should be further clarified. The Council could be the forum for high-level dialogue on broad, cross-cutting development themes, and could give guidance to the executive boards on the follow-up to global conferences. The Council should also address cross-cutting policy issues relating to operational activities as well as to resources.
- The executive boards should concentrate on management and funding issues, with the focus mainly on downstream coordination, thereby having a role in contributing to the implementation of outcomes of the conferences at the country level.
- Reports to the Council by the executive boards should be more analytical in order to permit the Council to fulfil its coordination role. Less emphasis should be placed on process in these reports, with more space given to factual analysis.
- The executive boards should invite the Council to transmit recommendations back to the boards on ways to better interact with the Council.

III. Inter-agency coordination

- The coordinating role of the Council and the active leadership of ACC are of utmost importance to inter-agency coordination in view of the fact that the conferences have provided the programmatic basis for such coordination in terms of joint action, analysis and implementation.
- The follow-up to global conferences often requires collaboration or joint programming, but mechanisms for funding such initiatives are not always available. Therefore, the Council should encourage the mobilization of resources for coordination purposes and joint activities. Special-purpose arrangements and round tables could be needed for funding specific programmes or themes.

A. ACC task forces

- The ACC task forces have been particularly important in translating the conference goals to the field level and their results should be more fully disseminated.
- The resident coordinator system needs to use the task forces' outputs, in particular in preparing programming frameworks, and to disseminate them to Governments and other partners. Use by regional commissions is also important. Feedback on the use of these outputs in specific country situations is important in order to adapt, update or supplement them.
- Guidance by the Council is required to ensure that effective successor arrangements for the task forces are in place. The ACC standing machinery, and the Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions (CCPOQ) in particular, is taking over from these task forces and is carrying forward their results.
- Follow-up to the work of the task forces should also include the use of networks of United Nations system organizations. Such networks make use of tasks managers, enable Headquarters and country coordination, and use information technology and liaise with ACC.

B. ACC standing committees

- ACC standing committees should pursue and enhance their efforts to support policy development based on conference outcomes and to develop guidance for country-level staff. They should also address further the issue of resource mobilization.
- Regular interaction between the inter-agency committees on women and gender equality, and on sustainable development, and the CCPOQ is important. Overall, it is considered that strengthening the system-wide gender perspective remains an item of unfinished business of coordination.
- Communication and interaction should be enhanced between the two executive committees (the Executive Committee for Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Group (UNDG)), and between them and ACC standing bodies, in particular CCPOQ and the Inter-agency Committee on Women and Gender Equality (IACWGE), in order to link the broader system with the executive committees' work.

C. ACC and the Council

- The interaction between the Council and ACC requires further improvement and ACC's activities should become more transparent and there should be a more intensive interaction between ACC and its subsidiary machinery and the Council. Regular arrangements to facilitate interaction between the Secretariat and Member States on the activities of ACC could be established.

D. Specialized agencies

- The Council needs to strengthen its interaction with the specialized agencies, and to enhance their participation in the sessions of the Council. As agencies have their own governing structures and mandate, the Council should enhance its interaction with the specialized agencies' governing bodies as well.
- The establishment of institutional ties between funds and programmes and specialized agencies, and between them and the Council, represents a major issue.

IV. Country-level follow-up

- Field-level implementation is ultimately the most important issue. National Governments have a key role in implementing conferences at the country level, and the United Nations system has an important role as facilitator. Besides lack of financial resources, coordination of national conference follow-up remains a problem in many countries. A major issue at the field level for the follow-up to global conferences is the availability of national capacities. Capacity-building initiatives should be promoted.
- The extent to which national-level implementation has been successful could be highlighted through having reports by the Secretariat on the various national experiences on progress in conference follow-up transmitted to the Council for its consideration.
- The resident coordinators play a crucial role in integrating the United Nations system's action to support national conference implementation. The follow-up of major United Nations conferences should be part of their mandate. The resident coordinator system should foster a broad dialogue and support the involvement of a wide range of parties in the follow-up to global conferences, including Governments, civil society and other donors. A joint situation analysis of where a country stands on conference follow-up may be carried out together with the Government. The resident coordinator system also has a role in promoting initiatives to build national capacity for conference implementation.
- The role of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) in the follow-up to global conferences has been confirmed. The involvement of the specialized agencies in the UNDAF process, within the resident coordinator system, should be enhanced in order to ensure better country-level coordination.
- Outputs of ACC task forces and ACC's standardized guidance are useful tools in enhancing the efforts already undertaken by the United Nations country teams for conference implementation. Directives for gender-mainstreaming need to be translated into practical guidelines for field staff.
- The annual reports of the resident coordinators should be used as a monitoring tool and to disseminate examples of best practices, while bearing in mind that the variety of country experiences should be reflected therein.
- Training of country teams on follow-up to global conferences should be encouraged through a wider use of the United Nations Staff College.
- Further identification of conference cross-cutting themes, and corresponding indicators, could also help national action. It would be useful to issue a report highlighting the main commitments of conferences as well as a few best practices for implementation. National handbooks on national implementation of global agendas could also be developed.
- The partnership and cooperation between the United Nations system and the Bretton Woods institutions need to be further enhanced in conference follow-up at country level, in close consultation with the Government and with relevant-other development actors. The recently decided participation of the World Bank in two UNDAF exercises, where the relation between UNDAF and country assistance strategies (CASs) will be explored, should be further encouraged.
- The implementation of conference outcomes in countries in a post-conflict situation needs to be examined. The Council could pay particular attention to implementation in countries as they move from a crisis situation to rehabilitation and long-term development.

V. Regional-level follow-up

- The regional and subregional dimensions of the follow-up to conferences require further expansion and improvement as most attention has thus far ben paid to global and country perspectives.
- The Council has a role to play in stimulating follow-up by the regional commissions, and in ensuring that the regional commissions use the functional commissions' work and address all conferences. This requires greater involvement of the regional commissions in the work of the Council on global conferences.
- Mechanisms are needed for making the results of the regional-level deliberations better known to the Council. In this regard, the Chairman of the group of regional commissions could address the Council annually.

- The activities of the regional commissions in the follow-up to conferences should be carried out on a more systematic basis. The regional commissions' interaction with other parts of the United Nations system needs to be clarified, particularly with regard to the funds and programmes.

VI. Monitoring

- In order to effectively monitor progress in the implementation of conferences at the country level, there is an urgent need for the multilateral system to develop a coherent set of basic indicators, as well as a need to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations system and of countries to collect and analyse statistics. The United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) are urged to develop and apply common indicators to the maximum extent possible.
- The Council, possibly at a future meeting of its coordination segment, could review ongoing work in the area of statistics and indicators, in order to ensure coherence and to stimulate further advances in the area of social indicators in particular.

Conclusion

6. In conclusion, it would appear that a number of challenges have to be confronted in order to ensure not only an effective follow-up to global conferences but also, and in particular, their implementation at the country level. Five challenges can be identified:

(a) Ensuring horizontal integration;

(b) Financing for the conference action plans as well as for horizontal cross-cutting follow-up efforts;

(c) Need to address the insufficiency of relevant statistical data;

(d) Need for more involvement of civil society;

(e) Mainstreaming of gender and incorporation of human rights as cross-cutting themes in the follow-up process.